

# Middlesex University Research Repository

An open access repository of

Middlesex University research

<http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk>

Dillon, Jean (2010) Triumph against adversity: how 'access to social work' students' in FE colleges exert individual agency and overcome structural barriers to gain entry to HE. In: Promoting Equity in Higher Education, 27-28th January 2010, Nottingham. . [Conference or Workshop Item]

Presentation

This version is available at: <https://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/4797/>

## Copyright:

Middlesex University Research Repository makes the University's research available electronically.

Copyright and moral rights to this work are retained by the author and/or other copyright owners unless otherwise stated. The work is supplied on the understanding that any use for commercial gain is strictly forbidden. A copy may be downloaded for personal, non-commercial, research or study without prior permission and without charge.

Works, including theses and research projects, may not be reproduced in any format or medium, or extensive quotations taken from them, or their content changed in any way, without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). They may not be sold or exploited commercially in any format or medium without the prior written permission of the copyright holder(s).

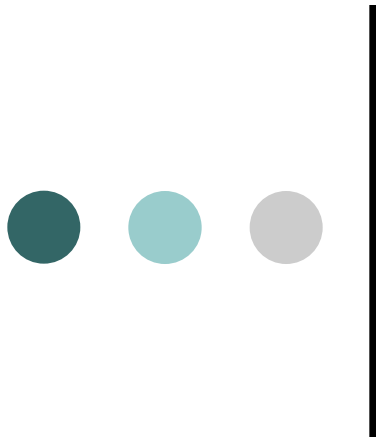
Full bibliographic details must be given when referring to, or quoting from full items including the author's name, the title of the work, publication details where relevant (place, publisher, date), pagination, and for theses or dissertations the awarding institution, the degree type awarded, and the date of the award.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Middlesex University via the following email address:

[eprints@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@mdx.ac.uk)

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated.

See also repository copyright: re-use policy: <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/policies.html#copy>

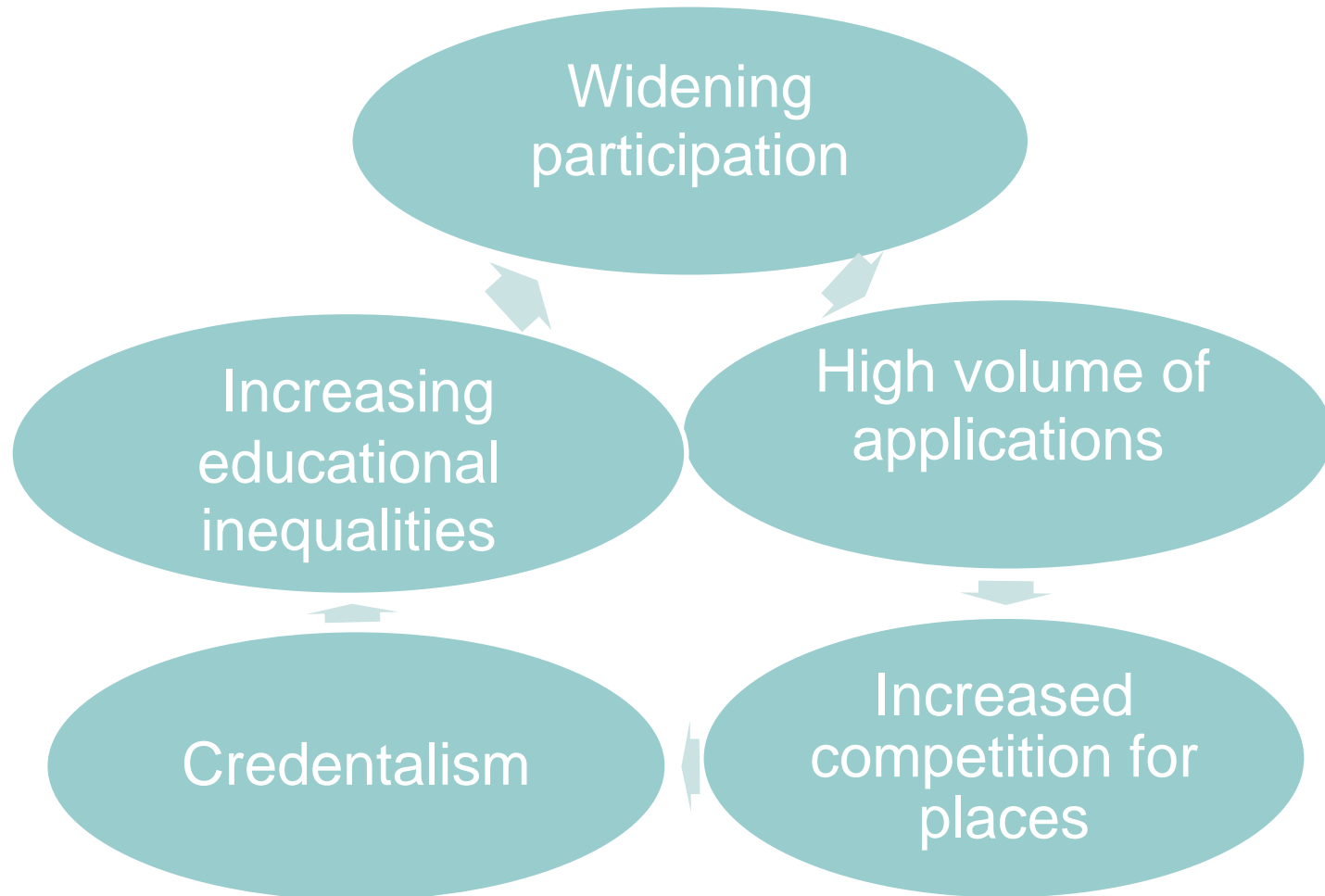


Triumph Against Adversity: how  
'Access to Social Work'  
students' in FE colleges exert  
individual agency and overcome  
structural barriers to gain entry  
to HE

**Jean Dillon, Middlesex University**



# Professional Tensions





# The Study

- Set within the context of widening participation policy and stringent DH entry requirements for the BA Social Work.
- A mixed method design using quantitative and qualitative approaches.
- A multidisciplinary theoretical framework was used.



# Finding 1: Social Factors

- 'Access to Social Work' courses are gendered, classed and raced, providing evidence of 'vocational stratification'.
- 'Vocational stratification' was reinforced by, 'institutional stratification' i.e. a lack of financial support from the State for some FE vocational courses.



## **Finding 2: Education and Career Decision-Making**

- Influenced by ‘forced’, ‘structural’ and ‘self-initiated’ ‘turning points’/life events.
- The cumulative effects of ‘secondary turning points’ had the most significant impact on students’ trajectories.



## Relevant Quote

*Getting a job in this country as it is, is very difficult even with good times, for an immigrant like myself. With no qualifications you have got no chance. Getting a cleaning job at Kings Cross and Victoria Stations, which I have done for many, many years, is the best I could get.*

**(Alanda – Black African male)**



## Finding 3: Barriers to HE

- Adverse socio-economic circumstances.
- Lack of financial support for access courses from the State.
- Issues with key skills development.
- Limited HE choices among students in general, but disproportionately for BME students.





## **Finding 4: Supportive Learning Cultures**

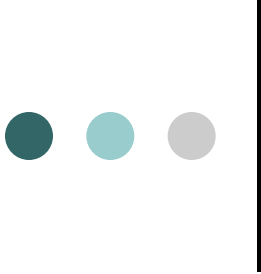
- Supportive learning cultures can help to counteract social inequalities, by for example, raising students' aspirations.
- Support structures formed among students are important, especially during times of crisis or self-doubt.



## Relevant Quote

*I nearly left the course. It was a very brief – just personal stuff happened. It was a bit like err when you make a really rash decision. I sat with... [her tutor] for about an hour and just went through why. It taught me how I've made rash decisions in the past. It seems like I'm running away. It made me realise how much I wanted this, enough to stick it through.*

**(Sheba, Black/White dual heritage female)**



## **Finding 5: Triumph Against Adversity**

- Structure and agency factors are the catalyst for students' determination to achieve their education and career desires.
- The students were working hard to achieve 'A' level equivalent qualifications in half the time taken for conventional 'A' levels.
- Students were determined to overcome and put adverse socio-economic experiences to 'good' use by making a difference to people.



## Relevant Quote

*...coming from Africa, part of my area was being affected by the civil war. My area became so vulnerable, in the sense that children died, and adults died, and some were left to decompose because of the land mines. if I receive education in this country I'm able to go back to serve my people down there.*

**(Esmea – Black African female)**



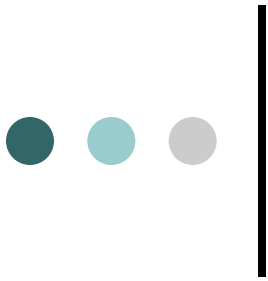
# Key Messages for Widening Participation

- Students education and career trajectories are complex and non-linear.
- Admissions procedures need to be balanced and holistic, taking into account social background factors.
- Students unique life course experiences need to be seen as an asset to HE, in a learning and teaching context and more generally.



# Small Group Discussion

1. Does your department/organisation have an espoused commitment to widening participation?
2. Can you identify factors that work to
  - a) aid
  - b) hinderthe operation of this commitment in practice?



# References

Bourdieu, P. (1993) *Sociology in Question*, London: Sage.

Elder, G.H. (2002) 'The Life Course and Aging: Some Accomplishments, Unfinished Tasks and New Directions', paper presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Boston Massachusetts on November 11, 2002, downloadable from:

[www.unc.edu/~elder/presentations/Life\\_Course\\_and\\_Aging.html](http://www.unc.edu/~elder/presentations/Life_Course_and_Aging.html)



# References

Hodkinson, P., Sparkes, A.C. and Hodkinson, H. (1996)  
*Triumphs and Tears: Young People, Markets and the  
Transition from School to Work*, London: David Fulton.

Jean's contact details: [j.dillon@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:j.dillon@mdx.ac.uk)